

Paralleled Stories Revived: Show Trials and Popular Front Policy in Hungary

Ötvös, István

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Ötvös, I. (2014). Paralleled Stories Revived: Show Trials and Popular Front Policy in Hungary. *Annals of the University of Bucharest / Political science series*, XVI(2), 39-53. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-411815>

Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer CC BY-NC-ND Lizenz (Namensnennung-Nicht-kommerziell-Keine Bearbeitung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu den CC-Lizenzen finden Sie hier:
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/deed.de>

Terms of use:

This document is made available under a CC BY-NC-ND Licence (Attribution-Non Commercial-NoDerivatives). For more information see:
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0>

PARALLELED STORIES REVIVED SHOW TRIALS AND POPULAR FRONT POLICY IN HUNGARY*

ISTVÁN ÖTVÖS

- “- Never cease to think.
- Thinking is the greatest danger that threatens us.
- We have been through much danger, too.
- And many people have survived them.
- Indeed, really many ones.”¹

Abstract: This study analyzes the László Rajk trial and its afterlife until the post-1989 transition. It illustrates that not only this trial, but also the memory of this prosecution was strictly regulated by official political directions. Moreover, the author emphasizes the direct connection between the Rajk trial and the changing idea of the popular front. If during the war, the Soviets and the European communist parties successfully followed the anti-fascist popular front strategy, the directives from Moscow changed in September 1947. Andrei Zhdanov's idea of the two camps forced the satellite parties to change the popular front policy. Once the anti-fascist popular front strategy sank into oblivion, Rajk could be turned into an enemy and be sentenced to death, although he had been a prominent figure of the anti-fascist resistance. When the popular front strategy was revived in new form, Rajk and his fate became a historic topic. Following the debates around this topic, this study stresses that the Rajk trial was a very problematic issue for János Kádár, who had a personal responsibility for this death and thus directly influenced the remembrance of the trial. Once Hungary headed towards political pluralism, the Rajk case sunk into oblivion, for the reevaluation of Imre Nagy's competing case emerged as the symbol of the break with the communist regime.

Keywords: political transition; communist regime; popular front; resistance; opposition; political police; show trial; rehabilitation; memory.

* This publication was supported by the TÁMOP 4.2.1. B-11/2/KMR-2011-0002 grant of the European Union and the Hungarian Government.

¹ Aladár Horváth, a Hungarian writer who lived in Romania, quoted this conversation with Valter Roman, an old-timer of the underground Romanian Communist Party. Roman himself went through many political experiences. A volunteer in the Spanish civil war, then a refugee in the Soviet Union, he became after WWII a general in the Romanian Army with political, educational and propaganda-related responsibilities, but was marginalized after the redefinition of the popular front policy in Romania (Horváth 2006, 149.)

Show trials were an essential part of Hungarian political history after WWII, although Hungarian academic publications did not necessarily make that obvious. These postwar events are generally well known, but the associated backstage maneuvers, which followed political turns and in some cases even anticipated them, are much less researched. This author examines the relationship between show trials in Hungary and the changing communist politics, discusses the closely guarded remembrance of these events until 1989 and highlights the politically supported narratives of the transition period.

The Popular Front Policy in Hungary as a Communist Strategy of Legitimation

After 1945, the Hungarian political elite changed entirely and the basis of legitimacy was radically transformed. The members of the new democratic government originated in the former opposition parties, while the former governing party disappeared and so did the extreme right. The parties in new democratic government had a more or less organized network and operated in a mass party framework. In these circumstances, the right wing of the former left – like the Smallholders' Party – became the right of the new political spectrum, while the left was represented by two Marxist parties: the social democrats and the communists.²

The international context and especially Hungary's position as loser in WWII forced all parties to join a coalition. These coalitions were, however, strictly regulated by the agreements which were established during the war. The agreement between the Smallholder's Party and the Social Democratic Party was set up in 1943. Yet, the latter had opened talks in September 1944 with the reorganized Hungarian Communist Party too. These two connections positioned the Social Democratic Party in the middle of the new Hungarian political life, as this organization served as the balance of the political changes. Nevertheless, the two agreements implied two different goals. From a political viewpoint, the agreement with the Smallholders' Party meant the reestablishment of a western-style democratic system, while the accord with the communists meant the imposition of the Soviet-type Marxist-Leninist ideals, as the two so-called workers' parties acknowledged. In 1945, in the enthusiasm of renewal, the conflict between these opposite paths did not seem yet sharp.

The members of the former opposition wanted to make clear the difference between them and the wartime regimes, so they demanded the punishment of war criminals. Such goal required the establishment of a new

² For more on the context in which the communist takeover took place in post-WWII Hungary, see Kenez (2009) and Mevius (2005).

type of political police in Hungary. Although it was the coalition government that founded this special police force, the leader of the organization became Gábor Péter, who was a veteran of the underground Communist Party since the war and a member of the Soviet espionage network. Accordingly, Péter successfully transformed this new police into the trusted instrument of the communists. At the end of the war, the Communist Party was one of the political organizations in the governmental coalition, but not the most powerful one. However, the communist leadership had ambitious goals in 1945. Nevertheless, the general election held in the autumn of that year showed another reality. The Communist Party could not reach its goal, for only 17 % of the voters elected them. In many electoral districts, the number of the votes did not even match the number of party members in 1945.

The other pole of the postwar political elite came from the circles of the political resistance movement. In Hungary, this resistance emerged and grew in strength from the middle of the 1930s as an intellectual movement against the existing government, which asked for social reforms and moderate political changes. The members of this political resistance wanted more than a governmental change, but less than a regime change. When compared to the interwar ruling elite, the representatives of this resistance appeared as radical leftists, yet they were not communists. The structure of the opposition movement changed during the war. Until 19 March 1944, as long as Hungary remained a non-occupied country, the resistance movement was based on political actions by intellectuals. After the German Army occupied Hungary and especially after the collapse of the Horthy regime on 15 October 1944, the resistance movement shortly turned into an armed movement too.

The postwar political elite originated to a large extent from this leftist intellectual movement. The political actors came from the resistance movement, but many of them were close to the new parties. All these actors imagined a new political framework based on a new concept of the popular front, although the participants were animated by different ideas and used different methods.³ The very idea of the popular front was not unfamiliar to the political thinking in Hungary, where such a front of the opposition had a political tradition from the interwar period. Then, the leftist opposition to the government tried to enforce a program of moderate reforms by using a sort of popular front. Organized in the 1930s, the March Front – which published its program structured on twelve points on 15 March 1937 – envisaged the transformation of the welfare social system and the breaking away from the party politics.

At the same time, there was another tradition of the popular front, which came from the Marxist left-wing movements. The political opposition formed

³ Above all, the non-communist members of the movement did not want a “revolution,” but a democratic government including all democratic political organizations (Dezsényi 1964, 121-122).

by Hungarian Marxists was not restricted to the communists. The so-called "official" Communist Party, which was a member of the Comintern, was a very small and disorganized group in the 1930s. The Central Committee could not maintain regular connections with the separate groups of the party after 1932. Moreover, many of the non-Comintern communist groups joined the aforementioned popular front of the leftist opposition. Although their aim was totally different, the "official" Communist Party followed the campaign of the other leftist groups and managed to organize eventually a camouflage organization, which could join the legal opposition movement easier. If the core of the communist strategy in the 1920s relied on the condemnation of cooperation with other parties, this situation changed by the beginning of the 1930s, once the western communist parties had successfully made use of the anti-fascist popular front strategy. The local communist leaders had realized even earlier the problems of this non-cooperative strategy devised by Moscow, but they had to comply with the rules of the Comintern.⁴

The unsuccessful political tactics of rejecting party coalitions did not disturb the Soviets until new problems emerged in Western Europe. Although there is no agreement regarding which of the two problems seemed more dangerous to Stalin, Hitler's takeover in Germany or the Spanish Civil War, the fact is that both emerged approximately at the same time and influenced the new front policy in the same way. Eventually Hitler proved to be the most dangerous, but in the mid 1930s the Spanish situation needed a more urgent response. The Spanish civil war appeared, on the one hand, as the perfect context to export the revolution, but on the other, this conflict anticipated the prospect of a general European war. If the panic of the revolution had spread across Europe, all countries would have joined the anti-communist alliance.

In these circumstances, Stalin needed allies against the threat. Both military and political alliances were necessary, but these two aspects were interconnected. France could seem as a perfect military ally for him, but this country could not have been a trustful one. In Stalin's mind, only a left-wing government in France could have guaranteed the alliance and make him sure of the friendship with this country. At the same time, the left-wing government could have protected the leftist parties, including the communists. However, the weakness of western European communist parties became quickly obvious and therefore Stalin changed the political strategy. In the 1930s, leftist so-called bourgeois parties became members in both the French and the Spanish Popular Fronts. In this context, the hidden goal of the communists was to coordinate and control all parties in the popular fronts. This new model of popular front

⁴ The story of the 1928 local government election in Romania shows the typical attitude of the Comintern. When the Romanian communist leaders joined a popular-front-style opposition, they were stopped by the Comintern leaders from Vienna.

strategy was organized “from above” with the purpose of allowing the communists to take over the other parties and movements in these bloc coalitions.

During WWII, yet another type of the popular front emerged. The prominent example of this type was to be found in Tito’s Yugoslavia. Contrary to the previous model, Tito’s front was built up “from below.” Tito could control his movement, which unified all members of the anti-German political groups. His followers were led by a high level of enthusiasm, while their practice was shaped by the military occupation of Yugoslavia. The Nazi hegemony caused the building up of popular fronts “from below” in every occupied European country. If somebody was not against the ambitions of the popular front, then it could join it given the level of tolerance regarding the political affiliation. More than others, the spectacular Yugoslav front was very operative on the battlefield. The other type of popular front “from below” was born in Poland during WWII. This political organization represented not only a powerful armed movement, but also a shadow society. Briefly put, these types of resistance movements were a special form of popular front policy during WWII.

Turning back to postwar Hungary and its radically changed political situation, one should note the dissolution of the interwar party system due to the free or forced immigration of most members of the former political elite. The new parties which rebuilt political life came from the former opposition. The elite change was almost complete, for only some representatives of the former administrative bodies remained in local councils. The former opposition established the framework of the new government, which appeared again as a type of popular front. The character of this popular front was similar to that of the resistance movements, as the new structure of political life originated in the pre-WWII popular front “from below.” If during the wartime the enemy was obvious, once the war against the Nazis ended, the common enemy disappeared. Thus, the members of the Hungarian popular front had lost their cohesion. Yet, the post-WWII parties in the democratic coalition completely agreed on the need to destroy the former political structures, elites and institutions. Eventually, those unwilling to cooperate in the increasingly communist-dominated political framework were forced into exile.

Otherwise, the communists successfully cooperated after WWII with many non-communist members of the resistance movement. The eminent Hungarian left-oriented publisher Imre Cserépfalvi was a member of the editorial board of the communist newspaper *Szabad Nép*. Many other intellectuals moved into this direction, but Cserépfalvi could be indeed considered a typical representative of these so-called “fellow travelers.” Although no communist, he was nonetheless a member of the anti-Nazi intelligentsia and of a group which received in 1942 a letter from the British Special Operations Executive that shows he was reckoned, at least by some

political actors in Great Britain, as a notable leader of this anti-Nazi opposition.⁵ These non-communist but anti-Nazi Hungarians really believed in the renewal of politics in their country in the sense of western-type democratization. They struggled for freedom and social justice and joined the communists for achieving this purpose, but discovered their hidden aims too late.

As mentioned, the punishment of the former war criminals represented a major goal of, as well as a legitimizing tool for, the new political elite. When the postwar political system started to work, it appeared that the easiest and at the same time legal way of punishing the war criminals in Hungary was to follow the Nuremberg model. A first version of political police and new courts were established, so the Nazi supporters in Hungary were eliminated between 1945 and 1949. However, there were disturbing issues from the beginning of these trials. The first victim of the new political police was an old-fashioned Hungarian Marxist, Pál Demény.⁶ His arrest in the spring of 1945 preceded that of the war criminals. As a veteran communist, Demény had much more influence in the labor movement than his newly enrolled comrades. His arrest represented an early warning that what was going on turned wrong, but few were able to detect it at that time. The newly appointed head of the political police Péter had first the task to purge the Communist Party and only then that to hunt for Nazis. In other words, his most important duty was to chase former comrades who had been formerly hunted by Horthy's police.⁷

A unified Hungarian Communist Party came into existence quickly due to the efforts of the comrades from the former underground movement. The new party members followed obediently the new leaders. These conditions offered the opportunity to destroy those parties which became right-wing, like the Smallholders' Party, by using the political police when there was no other option, like in Demény's case. Thus, a new chapter in the existence of the secret police began with the occurrence of the anti-Nazi trials. In the spring of 1946, a widespread investigation against local leaders was initiated in the Gyöngyös area. The targeted person became Pater Szaléz Kiss who was a very influential

⁵ Letters from "Peter" to "Imre" (National Archives of Hungary HS 4/126).

⁶ Pál Demény (1901-1991) was a founding member of the Independent Young Workers' Group in 1918, then entered the Communist Party of Hungary on 13 February 1919 and served in the Hungarian Red Army under the aegis of the Hungarian Republic of Councils. After August 1919, he led the Communist Youth Workers' Organization, was arrested several times, and refused to be changed and transferred to the Soviet Union. After 1924, he led a fraction which broke away from the "official" Communist Party. As leader of a group of around 4000 individuals, which was renamed in late 1944 as the Communist Party of Hungary, he negotiated their merging with the Communist Party led by Rajk and Péter. He was arrested on the last day of the siege of Budapest by Gábor Péter, the head of the political police in the Rákosi era, sentenced in 1946, and then in 1953, to prison and hard labor. He was released from prison on 13 October 1956 and rehabilitated in 1989 (Ötvös 2012, 234).

⁷ For Gábor Péter's earlier life, see Gyarmati (2002, 25-79).

Franciscan monk in the local society. He was put in connection to the local leaders of the Smallholders' Party and a group of its youth section. Although the archives do not contain real evidence, but only the statements of the executed persons, one could fairly assume that the investigation was conducted in such a way as to show that a wide-scale movement in the Gyöngyös area, which was supposedly controlled by the Smallholders' Party and the Franciscan monk, envisaged the killing of Soviet soldiers.

Although the Soviets heavily supported the Communist Party, the political struggle against the Smallholders' Party came to a deadlock by the end of 1946. The leaders of the latter had demanded successfully the enforcement of the proportionality of parliamentary mandates in all the state institutions, including the political police. At the same time, the communists were unsuccessful in their effort to introduce the planned economy and the banning of compulsory religious education. In many ways, it was a stalemate. In this context, the communist leader Mátyás Rákosi turned to what seemed his last resort: his faithful political police. At the beginning of 1947, a new criminal procedure was staged against the Hungarian Brotherhood. This process ushered the elimination of communists' main rivals from the Smallholders' Party and the achievement of a majority in the parliament through new elections scheduled for September of 1947. In short, these political problems were solved not by political means, but by using the political police led by Péter.

In the autumn of 1947, the communist world witnessed an important event with the meeting held in Skłarska Poręba, where the Cominform was born. Already before this, Rákosi had adopted the Hungarian style of popular front strategy characteristic to post-WWII Central Europe. At this time, his only task was to put into practice the Soviet goals. Accordingly, the right-wing parties were eventually disintegrated. However, the Cominform also imposed a new strategy to every communist leader in the satellite countries: the elimination of social-democracy. Nevertheless, the elimination of the social democrats was not an easy task, because this was a well-organized party which was supported by the working class and had more than fifty years of leftist political tradition. In this case, the tactic applied to members of other parties in the context of the anti-Nazi hunt was inefficient, for the social-democrats could not be plausibly portrayed as "fascists" or supporters of the "reaction." Thus, in the spring of 1948, before the congress of the Social Democratic Party which eventually decided to merge with the communists, the newspaper headlines were full of news about social democrat leaders accused by the political police of high treason. Such messages eventually reached the public and allowed Rákosi accomplish the regime change in Hungary in the next year and a half. The communists reorganized the economy following the Soviet model of central planning based on state ownership and prepared the last great step of the takeover: the elections of 15 May 1949, which assured the total political

hegemony of the newly established, communist-dominated, Hungarian Independent People's Front. With this, the majority of the Hungarian communists thought that the political power struggle had come to an end.

The Renewed Popular Front and the Rajk Show Trial

In this post-electoral context, the arrest of the former communist Minister of Interior László Rajk, who served until then his party faithfully, came as startling news. Many communists became confused, as the reason behind this arrest was nebulous. Indeed, the Rajk case involved a very complicate trial. Yet, two important elements were clear. The first aspect involves the relationship between the State Security Service and the Ministry of Internal Affairs. As head of this ministry, Rajk fought for the control of the political police. Theoretically, the minister of interior was the head of the State Security Service as well before 1950. As documents in the National Archives of Hungary illustrate, the head of the political police Péter complained many times to Rákosi that the activity of the institution which he headed suffered because of Rajk, who thought it was his duty to check their work, including the reports that were sent to Moscow (MNL OL MK-S 276 f. 62/2). The struggle for mastery between Péter and Rajk was a long duel. In the summer of 1948, Rajk was ousted from the Ministry of Internal Affairs and appointed as head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The communist authorities never revealed the reason of this change, but the subsequent show trial against Rajk illustrated that he recommended the moving of the files of the State Security Service to the Ministry of Internal Affairs.⁸ Thus, Péter's accusation that Rajk was an enemy was easier accepted. After his arrest in 1949, two members of the Political Committee interrogated Rajk: János Kádár and Mihály Farkas.⁹ During this interrogation, Farkas accused Rajk

⁸ Official Report of the Session of the Interior Committee, 6 July 1948 (MNL OL MK-S 276. f. 84/1).

⁹ János Kádár (1912-89) was born in Fiume as János Csermanek (name used until 1945). Between 1918 and 1929, he followed his studies in Budapest. After working in a typewriter factory for a year, he lost his job and entered the Communist Youth Workers Union. Arrested in 1931, he was released after a year without trial and kept under surveillance by the police. In 1933, he was arrested again and sentenced to two years of prison. In January 1934, the periodical *Kommunista* accused him as collaborator of the police and traitor. In 1937, he was again released from jail and joined the Social Democratic Party. In 1940, he acted as member of the reorganized Communist Party and since 1942 as member of the Secretariate of the Central Committee (CC). After the dissolution of the Comintern in 1943, he dissolved the Communist Party in Hungary and reorganized it as a wider popular movement under the name of Peace Party, a decision for which he was later to be punished for „liquiditatorism.” Caught by the German authorities on the border region with Yugoslavia in 1944, he was imprisoned in the Conti street Prison House, from where he was forced to march towards the western borders, but

of attempting at organizing a new intelligence unit in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The motive behind the trial seemed to be Rajk's initiative of extending attributions of his checking the activities of the intelligence units of the State Security Service (Varga 2001, 157-170). In reaction, Rákosi used initially political instruments and later political police procedures to eliminate Rajk, who was perceived by him as an inner "enemy" and a contestor of his hegemonic position.

However, the investigation was driven by a second reason too: for many veteran communists in Hungary, Rajk was a symbolic figure. In the early 1930s, when he joined the movement, the communists were persecuted by the police. Thus, Rajk and his comrades regarded themselves as heroes of the Marxist idea. At that time, the communists had also good connections with many non-communist leftist intellectuals. The party followed the anti-fascist popular front strategy, which was the reason why Rajk was regarded as a partner by these non-communist intellectuals, who then left the country in 1949-50 (Fejtő 1990, 106). Until this trial, the communist party still followed the same popular front policy and tried to build a wider social basis on that policy.¹⁰ In this way, they managed to attract many leftist intellectuals in their political machinery. There were already some signs of political change even before Rajk's arrest, but these

managed to flee, came back to Budapest and joined the resistance movement. In 1945, he was a member of the CC of the Communist Party, the second in command in the Budapest Police, an elected member of the Provisional National Assembly. Kádár also followed Rajk as head of the communist local party organs in Budapest. Between 1945 and 1948, he was deputy of the first secretary of the communist party, confirmed in this position in the Hungarian Workers' Party (HWP) which resulted from the 1948 merge of the communists and social-democrats. Also in 1948, Kádár replaced Rajk as minister of internal affairs. Present at the interrogation of Rajk in 1949, he informed the leading bodies of the HWP about the stages of the trial. In 1950, he was replaced from his ministerial position and in 1951 was arrested and jailed for life, following a show-trial. He was nonetheless released on 22 July 1954, rehabilitated and appointed secretary of the HWP in the Thirteenth Administrative Sector of Budapest and a year later of the Pest county. In March 1956, he was present at the inner party leadership meeting when Rákosi informed about the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Kádár was reincluded in the central leading bodies of the HWP in July 1956 and, as well known, he replaced Ernő Gerő as first secretary of the HWP on 24 October 1956. Few days later, on 1 November 1956, after attending the Nagy government's meeting, where the historic decisions about neutrality and leaving the Warsaw Pact Organization were made, he left for Moscow in secret. On 4 November 1956, Kádár arrived with the Soviet support in Szolnok, where he announced the establishment of a new workers' and peasants' government and made a radio statement in support of the Soviet Army's brutal intervention against the Hungarian revolution and its leadership. Installed by the Soviets on 5 November 1956 as the leader of the reestablished communist regime, he began its long ruling with harsh reprisals against the participants in the revolution, including the execution of former Prime Minister Imre Nagy (Bihari 2005, 316-328).

¹⁰ According to János M. Rainer's considerations on „pillars” of the governmental philosophy of the Hungarian Communist Party in 1945.

signs could be clearly perceived only afterwards. In fact, Rajk's fate showed everybody that the popular front policy was over.

It was not by coincidence that in the next year the whole staff of the Hungarian army was replaced. It is also worth mentioning that György Pálffy, who had led the Hungarian Army's Intelligence Service after WWII, was also arrested as part of the trial staged against Rajk in 1949. From Pálffy's background, one can infer two issues which help one understand the logic of building show cases. First, Pálffy was among those who worked for the Soviet espionage.¹¹ Many political leaders thought that the direct connection with Moscow would offer them protection, but in the summer of 1949 it became clear that this assumption was no longer valid. Pálffy's case illustrates that Rákosi, once in control of the party and the state, also aimed at controlling the information passed on to the Soviet Union. Second, Pálffy and Rajk knew each other from before the war and both had been prominent members of the resistance. Rajk was a political leader of the communist group within this movement, while Pálffy as a military expert of it. By the time the Rajk trial began unfolding, Rákosi had already reorganized the earlier version of popular front which was built on the heritage of the resistance movement and managed to marginalize in the new organization all those who had become in the meantime undesirable, like Rajk.

Established on January 1949, the Hungarian Independent People's Front had different political goals than the former popular front. Some key questions in this respect were clarified by an editorial article entitled "Democratic unity" and published in *Szabad Nép* on 30 January.¹² Above all, this leading article emphasized that the former popular front was a mere anti-fascist organization with dubious membership: "It is an avowed fact that representatives of the imperialists, the plutocrats and the class of big landowners had been infiltrated the former popular front." The reason for establishing a new popular front – continued the article – was the removal of these "enemies of the people."¹³ In the Marxist-Leninist jargon, this expression usually referred to non-communists. Unlike the previous version, the new popular front was led by the vanguard "party of the working class:" the communists. Rajk was a member of the National Board of the new popular front, but not its leader. The president of the organization became Rákosi, although Rajk was the very embodiment of the popular front policy for his comrades. The removal of Imre Nagy and László Rajk from their ministerial positions in the spring and summer of 1948 could

¹¹ When Pálffy was arrested, a transceiver was found on his flat. This was supposed to be the main evidence in the trial, but the Soviets asked few days later for his transceiver.

¹² According to the program published in *Szabad Nép*, the new Popular Front replaced party rivalry (*Szabad Nép* 1949a: 1-2).

¹³ See also A Magyar Függetlenségi Népfront nyilatkozata (Declaration of the Hungarian Independence's Popular Front) (*Szabad Nép*, 1949b: 1).

not have been an accident. Yet, Rákosi needed both for a little while. After the new elections held on 15 May 1949, this story has changed. Rákosi was in full control, so Rajk was quickly arrested, while Nagy only pushed into a corner. This timing is particularly important, for it represents evidence for our above mentioned assertion.

The Afterlife of the Rajk Trail

The satellite trials of the Rajk case were over by 1952. However, these trials were placed in 1953 again on the agenda with the reexamination of those cases which were staged as show trials. At that time, the political context had changed: Stalin had died and Imre Nagy had become prime minister. Obviously, the revision had many different political reasons. On the one hand, the Soviets required it, but on the other, Nagy acted out of personal conviction likewise. It can be hardly proved that the members of the Soviet State Security staff in Hungary involved in the Hungarian show trials disappeared from the scene due to these revisions. Yet, the rehabilitation was useful to the Soviets as well, because in this way they and their Hungarian comrades could confirm the removal of the Stalinists through the most appropriated documents. For the Soviets, the guiding principle was without question the political interest. However, Nagy's interests were similar. He had probably the intention to rectify an act of injustice too, but the initiative behind the revision of the show trials did not actually belong to him. According to documents from the Archives of the Institute of Military History, the Military Prosecution made from August 1952 a proposal to review the convictions.¹⁴ This is not a matter of prime importance, but it illustrates that the Military Prosecution had initiated the mechanism of rehabilitation while Mátyás Rákosi and Mihály Farkas, at that time Minister of Defense, still held their official positions. In other words, the post-Stalinist changes of personnel in the Presidency of the Council of Ministers were not connected to the revision of the show trials, for those in charge had begun to elaborate the relevant procedures before Nagy became prime-minister in 1953.

At that time, Rákosi had been in command of the party for many years, and Nagy knew well that he needed the support of the party in order to return in a leading position. As there was no political pluralism, one had to seek the support of the single existing party. In such context, the idea of the former

¹⁴ Report on the realization of Order HM 0/4, 14 July 1952 (HIL MN 1952/T 807. d. 47. f.) Kispál Pál maj. prosecutor and Ónody György cap. political officer: „It was found that the Courts and Prosecutions made mistakes when they enforced the prohibition from public affairs as secondary/supplementary punishment. The attorney general's office, willing to eliminate the mistakes, asked for revision in 182 cases judged by the Military Higher Court” (HIL MN 1952/T 807. d. 63 f. – 30 September 1952). After the report, a review was conducted and came to the conclusion that the act of accusation was based only on the confessions and the briefs. The remedies were ruled in October (HIL MN 1952/T 807. d. 65. f.)

victims of the Stalinist period to create a sort of “party within the party” seemed the only reasonable response (Sipos 2005, 227-260). That Nagy and others envisaged such a goal, it was all very clear to Rákosi. Thus, he maintained after 1953 his leading position in the party and intended to control the reexamination of the show trials. Nagy’s interest was to accelerate and finish the revisions within a short time span, but Rákosi was against it and had the means of preventing this plan. Thus, the former was in a really difficult position. Tibor Méray, who became later Nagy’s supporter, considered his governmental program a sort of anti-party manifestation, which was going on in the summer of 1953: “Everyone is working under extraordinarily difficult circumstances, as even the supporters failed to understand the situation. The prime minister had felt the consequences of not being assured of the party’s support, since he was trying to find new forums and to place his supporters in powerful positions. He had drummed up mass organizational support to renew the popular front policy” (Méray 2006).

Nagy’s attempts did not live up to the expectations because he quickly remained powerless. In spite of displaying a collective leadership, Rákosi still dominated the party and the groups inside; he even controlled the government through his henchmen. Thus, he could manage to regain almost full control by the spring of 1954 (Ságvári 1989). Yet, this reestablishment could not be carried out completely, and this was the source of Rákosi’s hesitant policy in the following years 1954-55. In this context, Rákosi and his followers had to allow the reburial of Rajk on 6 October 1956 and showed in this way their indecision to confront the inner-party opposition. Consequently, one should not overestimate the importance of this reburial, although at that time seemed to suggest a renewal of the political situation. The process of rehabilitation focused only on the leftist political victims, first of all the communists and the former social democrats. This clearly illustrated the limits of Nagy’s policy. He should have forced for a wider base of the rehabilitation, which might have also assured him a better chance to maintain his governance. Only the social democrats benefited from this “new policy,” which did not apply to those so-called bourgeois politicians, who had been in fact leftist during the war. They were excluded from the new popular front too. Thus, the rehabilitation did not refer to the Smallholders’ Party members or the people related to different religious denominations.¹⁵ It was the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 that marked the end of the popular front. The revolution also cancelled everything related to the new policy, so the revision of the Rajk case was discontinued, in spite of the fact that his reburial, which was a public event of the rehabilitation process, was not directly connected to the revolution as such. The reburial was rather a symptom of Rákosi’s dwindling power.

¹⁵ If the rehabilitation had happened exclusively on a legal basis, as it occurred after the political transition in 1989-90, that sort of restriction would have been impossible.

After 1956, the cohesion in the communist party increased, but because of the revolution, the popular front policy could not continue immediately. Yet, the popular front policy did reemerge in 1963, after Kádár stopped the reprisals. Then, both the Rajk trial and the popular front policy appeared again in public debates. After the revolution, Kádár used violence in order to reestablish order, but once that was achieved, Kádár needed to rebuild the cohesion of the party, just like Rákosi before him. As Talleyrand put it to Napoleon some two hundred years before, the Hungarian leader knew that he could not sit on bayonets. It is impossible to know if Kádár was indeed influenced by Talleyrand's classic piece of advice, but he was nonetheless aware that it was impossible to force a society live with such internal tensions. Thus, he announced the well-known renewed formula of the popular front policy: "who is not against us is with us." At the same time, Kádár was perfectly aware of the way his comrades in Moscow thought and too clever to risk. He had a great deal of experience, which taught him that every single communist politician who did not adhere to the absolute superiority of the party had failed. If not before, this was obvious to him at the time when he was released from jail in 1954. Consequently, he made sure that the popular front he proclaimed did not appear as an alternative political organization to the party, for the party remained for him the most important and the single framework of political activity.¹⁶

The consolidation of Kádár's power also required a new order. In this respect, resuming the revision of show trials in 1962 was a rather obvious choice. This sort of (re)solution was definitely not his aim, but there he changed his views after the investigative report on the role of the judicial authorities was finished.¹⁷ The report offered him an excellent occasion not only to expose the hardliners, but also to illustrate that he was a victim of Rákosi's rule. Yet, the political circumstances asked for an ambivalent reexamination of the show trials. On the one hand, Kádár stood for this rehabilitation process because he needed the support of the former victims. On the other, he did not want to talk about Rajk's trial, for comrades knew well his infamous role in this case. This ambivalence of the Kádár era toned down the idea of the popular front or the Rajk case in official discussions. Yet, a college (*kollégium*) of the Karl Marx Economic University took the name of László Rajk in 1970. Briefly put, one could freely discuss about Rajk's death under Kádár's rule, but not about his trial.¹⁸

¹⁶ Kádár's self-limiting behaviour was observed by Méray (2006, 50-51).

¹⁷ Összefoglaló a belügyi és igazságügyi szervek vezetői számára a volt államvédelmi és igazságügyi szervek szerepéről a személyi kultusz idején a munkásmozgalmi emberek ellen elkövetett törvénysértésekben. 14 november 1962. (Summary report for the leaders of judicial authorities about the role of the former state security and judicial authorities in the crimes against the participants of the labour movement in the period of the personality cult. 14 November 1962) (Horváth 1992, 675-733).

¹⁸ As an example, see Strassenreiter & Sipos (1974). This small book was the first publication about Rajk in many years. The authors of this book summed up the biography of Rajk, but refrained from analyzing the trial.

The Rajk's story was put again on the agenda for the last time when the party entered in defensive in the late 1980s. When the communists started to prepare the transition, the younger leaders of the party understood they needed to build up a new profile of the movement. In order to achieve such a goal, there were only two possibilities of claiming legitimacy through political descend. If they chose to rehabilitate Imre Nagy, who had become a martyr after the revolution of 1956, the party had to face Kádár's responsibility for the reprisals. If they tried to build up a new myth around Rajk, his historical role in the communist takeover of power after WWII had to be revealed. In this dilemmatic context, many new documents and books about the Rajk trial came to be published (Zinner 1988; Soltész 1989; Paizs 1989). It was due to these historical works that Rajk's rehabilitation in the frame of the post-communist society was actually achieved. Yet, Rajk was a too committed and bellicose Bolshevik to be a representative of the "socialism with human face." Nagy was a much more suitable character in this respect, but the attempt to use him also failed, although the revolution of 1956 emerged by 1989 as the most important question related to the communist past.

Before the transition, party leaders also tried to rethink the popular front policy. However, after the Soviet support disappeared, the Hungarian communist elite preferred to let the opposition movement grow and prepared for free elections. They imagined that after elections the new democratic parties could be their partners in a governing coalition, in case they would not be strong enough to govern the country alone. In the last two years of the communist era, many different types of a new popular front were imagined, but without any historical argument. In the frame of building a new, democratic political system, the last attempt to revitalize this strategy was in 1992, when the leftist opposition to the government led by the Hungarian Democratic Forum attempted to organize a popular front-type of movement. This movement supported the return of the Hungarian Socialist Party to governance in 1994. However, Rajk and Nagy were not important elements in this rethinking. The framework of political life has changed, and so were the ways past was recalled. To conclude, the Rajk case, including its afterlife, and the popular front regarded as a type of political thinking are parallel phenomena in the Hungarian (hi)story after 1945. Rajk case reappeared suddenly on the agenda whenever the party needed to renew the idea of the popular front in order to create new solidarities. The sinuous evolution of Rajk case not only mirrors the relations between the party and the popular front, but also illustrates the changing definitions of the latter in accordance with the policy promoted by the former.

REFERENCES

Documents from Archives

- National Archives of Hungary (Magyar Országos Levéltár). MNL OL MK-S 276.
Archives of the Institute of Military History (Hadtörténeti Intézet Levéltára). HIL MN 1952 / T 807.

Volumes of Published Documents

- HORVÁTH, Ilona et al., eds. 1992. *Iratok az igazságszolgáltatás történetéhez I.* Budapest: Közgazdasági és Jogi Könyvkiadó.
- VARGA, László, ed. 2001. *Kádár János bírái előtt.* Budapest: Osiris-BFL.

Newspaper articles

- Szabad Nép.* 1949a. Demokratikus egység. 30 January: 1-2.
- Szabad Nép.* 1949b. A Magyar Függetlenségi Népfrent nyilatkozata. 1 February: 1.

Bibliographical references

- BIHARI, Mihály. 2005. *Magyar politika 1944-2004: Politikai és hatalmi viszonyok.* Budapest: Osiris Kiadó.
- DEZSÉNYI, Miklós. 1964. *Örvények a Dunán: Egy katona emlékei.* Budapest: Móra Kiadó.
- FEJTŐ, Ferenc. 1990. *Budapesttől Párizsig.* Budapest: Magvető Kiadó.
- GYARMATI, György. 2002. Péter Gábor fiatalsága, 1906-1945: Kutatási gondok az ÁVH-főnök életrajzának feltárásában. In *Trezor 2. A Hivatal Évkönyve*, ed. Gyarmati György, 25-79. Budapest: ÁBTL.
- HORVÁTH, Andor. 2006. Ébredés: Napló és kommentár. In *Viharok: 1956-os irodalom a Korunkban*, ed. Balázs Imre József, 138-146. Kolozsvár: Kom-Press Kiadó.
- KENEZ, Peter. 2009. *Hungary from the Nazis to the Soviets: The Establishment of the Communist Regime in Hungary, 1944-1948.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- MÉRAY, Tibor. 2006. Emlékezés egy nyári délelőttre. In *Viharok: 1956-os irodalom a Korunkban*, ed. Balázs Imre József, 50-51. Kolozsvár: Kom-Press Kiadó.
- MEVIUS, Martin. 2005. *Agents of Moscow: The Hungarian Communist Party and the Origins of Socialist Patriotism, 1941-1953.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- ÖTVÖS, István. 2012. *Koncepcióváltások: A Rajk-per katonai vonala.* Máriabesnyő-Gödöllő: Attraktor.
- PAIZS, Gábor. 1989. *Rajk per.* Budapest: Ötlet Kiadó.
- SÁGVÁRI, Ágnes. 1989. *Mert nem hallgathatok: Egy jó házból való pártmunkás emlékei.* Budapest: Magyar Hírlap Könyvek.
- SIPOS, Levente. 2005. Imre Nagy and the Patriotic Popular Front. In *Regimes and Transformations: Hungary in the Twentieth Century*, eds. István Feitl & Balázs Sipos, 227-260. Budapest: Napvilág Kiadó.
- SOLTÉSZ, István. 1989. *Rajk László.* Budapest: Láng.
- STRASSENREITER, Erzsébet & Péter SIPOS. 1974. *Rajk László.* Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó.
- ZINNER, Tibor. 1988. *Adalékok a magyarországi koncepciók peréhez.* Székesfehérvár: Videoton.